



1989

Still Life without Substance: The Poetics of Agency

Alan Filreis

University of Pennsylvania, afilreis@writing.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/poetics_papers

Filreis, Alan, "Still Life without Substance: The Poetics of Agency" (1989). *Poetics Studies Papers*. 4.
http://repository.upenn.edu/poetics_papers/4

Alan Filreis. "Still Life without Substance: Wallace Stevens and the Language of Agency", *Poetics Today*, 10, 2 (Summer 1989), "Art and Literature" issue, ed. Wendy Steiner, 345-72.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/poetics_papers/4
For more information, please contact libraryrepository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Still Life without Substance: The Poetics of Agency

Abstract

A historical semiotic reading of poems Wallace Stevens wrote out of his relationship with French agents for the acquisition of paintings.

Comments

Alan Filreis. "Still Life without Substance: Wallace Stevens and the Language of Agency", *Poetics Today*, 10, 2 (Summer 1989), "Art and Literature" issue, ed. Wendy Steiner, 345-72.

Still Life without Substance: Wallace Stevens and the Language of Agency

Alan Filreis
English, Pennsylvania

Because it closely associates modern poetry and modern painting, the challenging thesis that we can place relation before substance as the basis of similarity (Steiner 1982) calls for energetic testing. Beginning such a test, we move with new competence past the descriptive poem, a work that places itself in relation to a thing or scene as if having painted it. This is the familiar case of the poem talking “like” a painting while otherwise conventionally pointing to things in the world as referents. Testing further, we come across a more interesting second case, the poem-about-painting, placing itself apparently in relation to a worldly thing or scene and also in relation to a painting modeled on the “same” thing or scene—where, that is, the dependence on painting or world may be ambiguous. This is the poem “about” a specific paint-

I wish to acknowledge the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, and the Henry E. Huntington Library (HEH), San Marino, California, for giving me permission to quote from their Wallace Stevens archives. Quotations from these unpublished letters are parenthetically cited by archive, author, date, and, in the case of Huntington materials, accession code. Research for this essay was made possible by a grant from the Huntington Library. I also wish to acknowledge the contributions of Susan Albertine and Sandra L. Webb, who helped me with Paule Vidal's French, and Barbara Spitz of the architecture firm Francis, Kauffman, Wilkinson, Pepper (Philadelphia), who reconstructed Vidal's lost sketch of the Tal Coat still life shown in Figure 1.

1. Of this second type, Stevens's “Landscape with Boat” and the famous Picasso *Poetics Today* 10:2 (Summer 1989). Copyright © 1989 The Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics. ccc 0333-5372/89/\$2.50.

ing; here, the poem is to a real scene as a painting is to the same or a similar scene, though the painting may enjoy priority if the language of the poem explicitly acknowledges the debt.¹

Taking a third step, we come to the poem which relates itself to a painting by revealing to us nothing more than the characteristic process by which each arranges a world of models. Its language is critical. It is the rare case of a poem about a painting which does not replicate the painting in any way but through resemblances of relation. Actually, what is rare is not the incidence of such poems but the opportunity to locate them. For even the closest reader of relational resemblances, working backwards from such a poem, can never with any certainty know two things that must be known: that the poem does not primarily concern itself with substantial depiction and that somewhere there exists a canvas on which similar formal relations are painted.

In my view, then, the toughest test of the relationality thesis is the poem which is not modeled on but more exactly designed like a painting, and which utterly resists being read iconographically. This sort of interpretation seems risky, because the poem usually does not point toward a particular painting, or even speak an interartistic language. Indeed, the confidence with which I shall interpret Wallace Stevens's (1950) "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" (reproduced below) in relation to Pierre Tal Coat's *Still Life* (ca. 1945–46; Figure 1) is finally dependent on external evidence which initially suggests the pairing.

Angel Surrounded by Paysans

One of the countrymen:

There is

A welcome at the door to which no one comes?

The angel:

I am the angel of reality,

Seen for a moment standing in the door.

1. Of this second type, Stevens's "Landscape with Boat" and the famous Picasso canto of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" are two of many instances. Of the first type, the poem borrowing generally from the language of painting, there are many examples in Stevens's poetry—"Sea Surface Full of Clouds," "Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers," "The Common Life," "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together," and the eighteenth canto of "Blue Guitar." I place these last two poems only temporarily in the first category; my main purpose in this essay is to move them from the category of borrowing to that of replication, and to suggest that others may be similarly moved. Bonnie Costello (1985: 75–76) is certainly justified in using "The Common Life" as an example of how Stevens "borrows rather than copies" from painting, though I am afraid this generalization leads her to underestimate the extent to which Stevens renders in words exact resemblances and arrangements of specific paintings. I am indebted principally to Wendy Steiner's (1982) work for these defining characteristics; unfortunately, in presenting only three overly simple categories of poems-about-paintings, I must pass through and combine dozens of subtler distinctions she makes in *The Colors of Rhetoric*.



Figure 1. Pierre Tal Coat, *Still Life*, oil, 81 × 54 cm. Reproduced by permission of Holly Stevens and Watkinson Library, Trinity College. Photograph by Trinity College from a 1963 exhibit of Stevens's paintings.

I have neither ashen wing nor wear of ore 5
 And live without a tepid aureole,
 Or stars that follow me, not to attend,
 But, of my being and its knowing, part.
 I am one of you and being one of you
 Is being and knowing what I am and know. 10
 Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
 Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
 Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
 And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
 Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings, 15
 Like watery words awash; like meanings said
 By repetitions of half-meanings. Am I not,
 Myself, only half of a figure of a sort,
 A figure half seen, or seen for a moment, a man
 Of the mind, an apparition appavelled in 20
 Apparels of such lightest look that a turn
 Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone?

I elaborate the *ut pictura poesis* here as follows: As the painting surrounds a glass bowl with terrines, bottles, and pots, so the poem about the painting surrounds an angel with peasants. The similarity is relational and thus the poem is iconic. It is not that the poet really sees the glass bowl "as" an angel and the terrines, bottles, and pots "as" peasants, but that the glass bowl is set in relation to terrines, bottles, and pots as this angel is set in relation to peasants. By stressing the relation of depicted parts over depictions themselves, we eliminate a misleading question: How can a glass bowl seem to a poet like an angel? Such a question is posed by those who wish to make easy work of Stevens's modernism by viewing it as inherently dissociational or, to use Stevens's own word, "unreasonable." Surely it is unreasonable, these detractors might argue, that Stevens wrote a poem "about" a painting, altogether ignoring the most distinct, central figure in the painting. The napkin would indeed have had to be represented if the poem responded primarily to the substance of the depictions. Despite Stevens's initial attraction to its strong lines—a temporary response preserved in his letters—the napkin did not survive into the poem because it bore little relation to the other forms. It is surrounded by them but expresses nothing of them in itself. To "express" in this manner is both a general requirement of relational similarity and the main point of the poem, that the angel is not one of the countrymen but is basically *like* them; he is, somewhat, an angel of earth.

By telling the peculiar story of how Stevens's view, or realization, of Tal Coat's painting was extended over many months (in part 2 of this essay), I will be able to press the point about the napkin's unimportance

further: The napkin is not the angel of the poem for exactly the same reason that the angel is without “ashen wing.” Indeed, the napkin, which for a while Stevens saw as a sketched outline, would have made for a conventional angel with wings. (Making a similar error, Stevens for a while thought the napkin was a fish with fins.) If the painting had suggested to Stevens that its point was only, or primarily, to set the lovely, ostentatious napkin against the darker, duller bottles, pots, terrines, and bowls, then such a conventionally figurative use of the napkin would have provided the poem with a moral statement about the discrepancy between heavenly angels and earthly peasants. But the poem makes no such moral statement. The angel of the poem is not nearly as outstanding or ostentatious, not as clearly delineated, as the napkin. Despite the size and centrality granted the napkin by perspective, the Venetian glass bowl is to be seen as central because its formal interactions are reproduced by the angel’s conversations with the peasants on the topic of bodily form.

The poem revises the hierarchy of angels and peasants partly because Stevens does not read the painting as generically traditional—not, for example, as an adoration of shepherds. On the contrary, he finds a source for his new poem’s antiperspectival modernism in the emotional Christianity of a fellow poet and correspondent, Thomas McGreevy, whose main purpose as poet, Catholic mystic, and passionate friend was to endorse spiritual relations by theoretically opposing the solidity of the body (as I shall discuss in part 3 of the essay). If McGreevy’s advocacy of noniconographic spiritualism did not soften Stevens’s post-Christian views of art—to proselytize was probably McGreevy’s intention—it did reinforce a lifelong interest in using visual sources more to arrange words than to describe objects (the topic of part 4).

I

Wallace Stevens’s own critical application of the interartistic analogy is well known, although “The Relations between Poetry and Painting” (Stevens 1951b) may not be the best place to look for it. His use of the analogy was often incidentally part of an alienating rhetorical strategy. If he sensed that you were accustomed to speak of poems exclusively as poetry, he whimsically spoke in terms of another art. It might even be suggested that he backed into the painting-poetry analogy in order to avoid talking about poems as critics of poetry habitually do. This was certainly his attitude when giving lectures to audiences consisting largely of poets and literary critics, and it is probably the main reason why the lectures, read now as essays in *The Necessary Angel* (Stevens 1951a), seem at many points incomprehensible. In formulating an explicit argument against art critics who apprehend poetry only poeti-

cally, he teased with the visual example. To an editor-poet who had written him of the “difficulty” of his poems by supposing the poem were a still life, he wrote, “You can imagine people accustomed to potatoes studying apples with the idea that unless the apples somehow contain potatoes they are unreasonable” (Texas, Stevens to Alice C. Henderson, March 27, 1922). To the members of the English Institute at Columbia University, he seemed to enjoy confusing the two critical languages:

Vasari said of Giorgione that he painted nothing he had not seen in nature. This portrait [*Portrait of a Young Man*] is an instance of a real object that is at the same time an imaginative object. *It has about it an imaginative bigness of diction.* We know that in poetry bigness and gaiety are precious characteristics of the diction. This portrait transfers that principle to painting. The subject is severe but its embellishment, though no less severe, is big and gay and one feels in the presence of this work that one is also in the presence of an abundant and joyous spirit, instantly perceptible in what may be called *the diction of the portrait.* (Stevens 1951b: 152–53; emphasis added)

Stevens’s audience must have found his reading imprecise. Perhaps “bigness and gaiety” can be said to embellish a “severe” subject. But while fully distinguished from subject, can embellishment also be included in the work of depiction (the subject has “its embellishment”)? Perhaps even more exasperatingly, his sudden critical turn (“but . . . one feels”) is based on something he calls “the diction of the portrait,” which he does not bother to define. And why does Stevens assess Giorgione favorably? Despite what his audience would expect from the poet of “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” with its clear debt to cubism, he seems to admire Vasari’s premodern criticism of Giorgione; one may copy invariably from nature. Reading backwards to the source of Stevens’s surprising interest in Giorgione, the Irish poet Thomas McGreevy, I would suggest, however, that Stevens’s use of McGreevy’s Giorgione indicates a renewed suspicion of substantial replication.

Both poets liked to speak about poetry in the language of painting. That, in particular, had excited Stevens about taking up a new, regular correspondence. At the height of their eight-year exchange, Stevens and McGreevy wrote weekly. Yet soon after long letters began flowing back and forth and McGreevy suggested that his fellow poet would value Giorgione, the correspondence suddenly dropped off. In explaining this “flap” to another correspondent, Barbara Church, the mutual friend who had put the two poets in contact, Stevens incidentally reveals his quirky process of responding to painting—by avoiding it. He might distinguish painting from all other things by approaching it routinely, as merely one of many things to see:

My correspondence with Mr. McGreevy is in suspense. For some reason he thought that I might be interested in Giorgione. It would be very difficult

for me to admit it even if I was because Giorgione was the subject of one of the more dreadful goings-on of Walter Pater and it would be impossible nowadays, I suppose, to concede anything at all in that direction. However, I thought that I might look around in New York. Then when we went down to New York a week or two ago we spent a great part of the day looking for wall paper and doing other necessary chores. The struggle to find a decent raincoat precludes even the slightest attention to Giorgione. The long and short of it is we came back without wall paper, without the raincoat and without Giorgione. But there were some other things that have been coming by parcel post [to Hartford, Connecticut] ever since. New York looked dull. All the keepers of smart shops are in Paris and everywhere you go there are signs about being closed until after Labor Day. I am not likely to go down again until September when I have been asked to read a paper at Columbia. I know that I ought not to do it, but I probably shall. The audience will be an audience of English teachers from Columbia and other places. Probably I shall meet some interesting people. Teachers and poets ought to be opposite sides of the same metal, but they are not, always. (Stevens 1966: 606).²

Coming back to Hartford “without Giorgione” apparently means “without having seen the Giorgiones on exhibit,” yet the whimsical parallelism—without wall paper, without raincoat, without Giorgione—suggests “without having picked up a Giorgione just as one picks up any desirable object.” Two weeks later, writing finally to McGreevy about his experience of going to see (but not seeing) the Giorgiones, he speaks the language he will soon use in the lecture (freshness and tenderness formally inverts an otherwise severe subject), but now in reference to a different painting. In the Columbia lecture he will refer to the portrait of a young man. But here, rather than cite a painting he has been able to see anytime—years earlier, Stevens’s wife framed and hung a photographic reproduction of that very painting in their home—he speaks of a painting about which he has only read, the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (ca. 1505) at the National Gallery:

About Giorgione: when we went to New York some time ago there was not a moment to spare for this sort of thing. When we came back to Hartford I found more at home than I was conscious of. I suppose that what you were thinking of was the young poet relishing reality. I have written several letters to Mrs. Church recently in which I at least referred to phases of this: *the momentum toward abstraction, the counter-effect of a greatly increased feeling for things that one sees and touches*. I had not realized before looking around

2. McGreevy understood the citation of Pater here and reread “The School of Giorgione” “with some little impatience” that summer. Stevens had read Pater fifty years earlier, at Harvard; his annotated copies, including, as he noted to McGreevy, the essay on Giorgione, were at this point stored in the attic. But not being “able to concede anything in that direction” probably refers as much to his unwillingness to go through old books in the attic as to his horror of Pater.

[in books] that Giorgione's *Adoration of the Shepherds* is in Washington. This is full of the freshness, the tenderness that seem to be his characteristics. I notice that Vasari says that he never painted anything except what actually existed in the world about him. I could split hairs about that. But, anyhow, thanks for speaking about him. What particularly interested me in him was the fact that for a good many years my wife has had a photograph of one of his portraits hanging up at home and this of itself made me want to know more about him. (Ibid.: 608; emphasis added)

What "particularly interested" him about Giorgione, then, is not one painting or another, nor the meaning created by a certain Christian arrangement, but the context a painting gains as an object within his personal idea of order; that context here becomes, obliquely, the "arrangement" of his home and his peculiar marriage. It "interested" him that this withdrawal or interiorizing is suggested somehow by the momentum (movement or school) toward abstraction in art as a response to a momentum (movement or motion) toward feeling; that in his effort to avoid certain things in the art world he has not "see[n] or touche[d]" the feeling of Giorgione in the "art world" of his own home. This conforms to Stevens's habitual pattern of repression, which I will define as a countereffect achieved through identifying as a movement, thus validating as art, the simple denial of "the world about him." The movement toward abstraction, itself becoming here a psychological symbol, stands in for a central but unseen, acutely felt "thing."

In the lecture the contradictions in Stevens's appreciation for Giorgione drop away. He does not admit there that he would want to "split hairs" about the notion that an art critic would judge a painter by the extent to which he paints from life, and his reference to Giorgione is mild but confusing. The challenge of referring to Giorgione in words as a "young poet relishing reality" and yet without endorsing realism had caused a small crisis. Surely there was a more coherent way of justifying how the "momentum toward abstraction" does not counter but corresponds to "a greatly increased feeling for things that one sees and touches." With Tal Coat, he soon found justification. Tal Coat would eventually seem to him one of these "fresh . . . young poets" also, but not in the sense that endorses realism; Tal Coat's work, Stevens would argue, was full of vitality, not because it copied from life but because it reproduced life's vitality in doing similarly vital but independent work. Slim as this distinction may seem, it marked a real advance for Stevens; vitality did not have to oppose artificiality. Vitality was a manner like life, a way of "looking around" in life, but did not necessarily require direct or sustained contact with life.

Stevens's surprising claims to Thomas McGreevy against "theoretical pictures" are closely tied to his admission that while he likes painting, he has little patience for actually seeing paintings on exhibit. After either seeing a show briefly or turning away at the last moment on

some curiously related pretext (such as to buy wall paper!), his response is to step out and “look around” in life for a fresh approach to painting. A week before giving the English Institute lecture at Columbia, on what he humorously called a “trial trip to New York,” Stevens went into the Museum of Modern Art to see a new show of contemporary Italian works; soon got tired of “a few pictures illustrating this and a few pictures illustrating that, mixed up with a few pictures as specimens of A and a few more pictures as specimens of B”; concluded that “the theoretical pictures seemed rather tiresome”; and went instead to one of his favorite fruiteries to stare through the window at the fruit as if it was the object of art he had traveled to see. He wrote this account to McGreevy, the unacknowledged source of the interartistic language in the lecture:

In painting, as in poetry, theory moves very rapidly and things that are revelations today are obsolete tomorrow, like the things on one's plate at dinner. . . . At the Museum of Modern Art they cultivate the idea that everything is the nuts: the stairs, the plants on the landings, the curtains in the windows, where there are any windows, arrangement of the walls. After about an hour of it you say the hell with it. . . . I enjoyed quite as much the window in a fruit shop that I know of which was filled with the most extraordinary things: beauteous plums, peaches like Swedish blondes, pears that made you think of Rubens and the first grapes pungent through the glass. But on the whole New York was a lemon. (Ibid.: 647)

By turning away from theoretical paintings, paintings programmatically “illustrating” a notion, Stevens went off to find an illustration of his own, seeing in peaches things like Swedish blondes, in pears things “that made you think of” painting, grapes so real that their pungence pushed out at you “through the glass” as from a picture frame. Stevens was not really turning away from painting by standing in front of the window of his fruitery; neither was he counteracting theoretical art by seeking contact with life. He was “merely” creating words for his own still life. Indeed, he could not resist making the entire “trial trip” a pun on the genre—still life—that saved the day (the experience was a lemon).

At least one poem resulted from this undirected journey into the interartistic analogy; “Study of Images I” may even refer specifically to one of the theoretical Italian paintings:

If the study of his images
Is the study of man, this image of Saturday,
This Italian symbol, this Southern landscape, is like
A waking, as in images we awake,
Within the very object that we seek,
Participants of its being. It is, we are.
.
. . . the image itself is false, a mere desire,

Not faded, if images are all we have.
 They can be no more faded than ourselves.
 (Stevens 1954: 463–64)

If we read this poem in the context of the poet turning away from the theoretical Italian paintings, the last lines simply cannot be said to define Stevens's reticence as a limitation. Rather, the seeming impersonality and self-denial of the phrase "If images are all we have" and the rhetorically narrowing word "mere" are actually signs of extension. Things, not images of things, fade. The false, unreal image is or suggests enlivened, not faded, desire, and discloses a world of profusion.

II

As he wrote these letters to McGreevy, took these very tentative steps back into the art world, and wrote and delivered the English Institute lecture, Stevens was engaged in two other important activities. He began to prepare a manuscript of a new collection of poems, which would be called *The Auroras of Autumn*. "Study of Images I" was one of these poems; "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" would be the last of the new poems to go into the manuscript. And during this time he was trying to purchase, sight unseen, a painting by the Breton Pierre Tal Coat. He and his Parisian art dealer, Paule Vidal, began corresponding about the purchase of a Tal Coat in March 1948. Seventeen months later, on the last day of September 1949, he received the painting, *Still Life*. On that day he reported to Paule Vidal that it had arrived in perfect condition (Stevens 1966: 649). On October 5 he wrote again to tell her that after looking at it for a long time he had renamed it *Angel Surrounded by Peasants* (ibid.: 650). Sometime in the next seven days he wrote the poem "Angel Surrounded by Paysans."³

The process by which Stevens purchased the Tal Coat is astonishingly elaborate. From the set of exchanges left behind by the poet and his agent we learn a good deal about how completely acquisition may affect apprehension. Here the process of the poet's acquisition of a

3. On October 13 Stevens sent a typescript of the poem to the editor of *Poetry London*, where it was published in January 1950. On October 19 he sent another copy of the poem to Victor Hammer, a handpress printer and art theorist (a devotee of Konrad Fiedler). Hammer's immediate decision to contract Fritz Kredel to illustrate the angel in his plaque of the poem—Hammer knew nothing of the painting—forced Stevens, beginning on November 9, to describe the angel for the purposes of representation, and he was not rid of this additional interpretive problem until well into the new year. Indeed, Hammer's insistence on applying the theories of Konrad Fiedler to the illustration of the angel, while initially irritating to Stevens, may have influenced both subsequent purchases of paintings and subsequent poems about painting. See, for example, Stevens 1966: 656, 661.

painting was indirect and gradual in the extreme, and so, apart from his usual tendency to imagine the real, it inherently suggests his interpretation of it. A painting can of course be seen as an object acquired, a thing to be bought, kept, and hung in a certain place as it becomes just another thing in, say, a room of things.⁴ Here, the discourse between agent and buyer-poet made the painting much more than that. This discourse invented a process by which the agent was compelled to take lessons from the poet, not about painting but about how to describe paintings in words, in short, how to come to terms with her agency.

First Paule Vidal described a group of paintings she had recently seen. She would work these descriptions into a letter which at the same time maintained the usual epistolary amenities. After the delay of the transatlantic mails, the poet studied these verbal descriptions. Sorting through his agent's French probably without great difficulty, he dismissed some descriptions of paintings as not his type and posed questions in subsequent letters, in English, about other paintings which did interest him. Vidal's lessons in agency were learned slowly; only once or twice, in fact, did she predict very accurately which aspect of her description would provoke the poet's next response. For his part, Stevens refused to teach, to train with his replies. Sometimes he responded excitedly to an incidental suggestion of a color in the painting, sometimes to a bit of hearsay about the painter, and at other times exclusively to the subject. Often, though again not predictably, he responded to the tone of the language she used to describe a painting or a group of paintings, though that tone, of course, might be entirely independent of the painter's tone.

When eventually putting into words the paintings of Tal Coat, Vidal referred directly to their language problem as an unequally shared burden: "*Mais je me sens écrasée par une telle responsabilité, que je n'ose pas choisir,*" she wrote ("I feel so overwhelmed by such a responsibility that I don't dare make a choice") (HEH, Vidal, May 28, 1949, WAS 2837). This overwhelming responsibility did not entail choosing among paintings, as it might have, but choosing among words. The poet's misreadings of the painting may even have begun at an earlier stage. Paule Vidal herself became increasingly aware that she was un-

4. In fact, several of Stevens's poems represent paintings in this "acquisitive" manner. Jean Labasque's *Portrait of Vidal*, now part of Holly Stevens's collection, is a portrait in oil of Stevens's first dealer, Anatole Vidal, father of the woman who sold him the Tal Coat. As it depicts the agent of art and books sitting at his table reading a book, so, in this case, the poem-about-painting "The Latest Freed Man" depicts the painting as a painting, a thing arranged in a room of things: the rug, this portrait, the chairs, each contributing to a scene now pictured to include painting (Stevens 1954: 205).

equal to the task of describing to a language-sensitive poet paintings he might like to buy. One example will suffice to explain this primary difficulty. In her letter of March 25, 1948, Paule Vidal describes a great range of paintings she has recently seen. One of the works is a sketch made for a Gobelins tapestry, which in turn is meant to illustrate a narrative sequence in *Don Quixote*. "The scene represents a group of men holding a large canvas [*une grande toile*] and tossing into the air one of their companions" (HEH, Vidal, WAS 2827). A clearer description would have established an exact grammatical relation of cause and effect between the canvas (a blanket or sailcloth) and the act of tossing the companion into the air. Still, knowledge of the *Don Quixote* narrative would quickly clear up that ambiguity, as would knowledge of the tapestry in question.⁵ If Stevens was not here driven to his French-English dictionary, he would surely have paused at "*une grande toile*," for his dealer's words might be describing something unusual, a sketch of a canvas within a canvas—were the men holding up a painting for us?—as *canvas* refers both to the medium and the representation. There is no hint in Vidal's description of her own attitude about the sketch; yet in his reply to this letter Stevens dismisses every one of the "pictures" she has described on the basis of the tone he perceives in her writing: "I am influenced in rejecting the pictures spoken of by you because I do not detect any real enthusiasm in what you say respecting them" (Stevens 1966: 583). Moreover, engaging the pretended lament he will use in "Study of Images I," that images are all we have, he seems happier to have Mademoiselle Vidal's letters describing paintings than the paintings she describes: "None of the pictures described by you in your letter of March 25th (*which I am delighted to have*) excite me" (ibid.; emphasis added).

Stevens first brought up his interest in Tal Coat when rejecting one of these preliminary verbal reports of paintings. He had read about the painter in *Le Point*, a journal which Vidal regularly sent him. Soon, in April 1948, she passed the window of a small gallery and saw displayed a Tal Coat "watercolor representing underbrush that delighted me" (HEH, Vidal, April 27, 1948, WAS 2828). After conversing with the dealer in the shop, she learned a few facts about the painter. He was modest and fled fame, she reported immediately to Stevens, and was "undoubtedly talented" (ibid.). By July she had narrowed her search. Of four Tal Coats she had by then seen, she reserved only one for the poet "because the color seemed to me likely to please you."⁶ When

5. Indeed, he thought he had seen this work "in our local museum here in Hartford," but it was "not the one described by you" (Stevens 1966: 583).

6. Nothing ever came of this reservation, possibly because here too Vidal's seemingly specific French may have confused the poet. "La couleur" would not always refer to color in such a context; she might have reserved this one painting for its

the reticent painter ignored Paule Vidal's subsequent inquiries—in the early fall she wrote to Stevens of “the silence of Tal Coat” and speculated that he was caught behind the iron curtain (HEH, Vidal, September 28, 1948, WAS 2831)—she decided to try to interest her client in an alternative, a landscape by Eric Detthow.

His response to this suggestion—“Do not choose a picture that you do not quite like on the theory that it is something that you think I will like”—enlarged her freedom of choice, and yet he drastically narrowed it by complaining about a single object in a painting. Vidal had sent a black-and-white photograph of a Detthow she thought might suit her client. His complaint about it does not concern the verbal representation of an object in the painting; though as trivial as many of his other complaints, it is at least based on his own “view” of a version of the picture (the photograph). Yet even here, in quibbling about the representation of a thing he names a “well,” he actually complains about “*a structure which looks like a well which I don't particularly like*” (Stevens 1966: 622; emphasis added). He likes “everything else” in the landscape but this “well” in the foreground (see Figure 2). In response to Stevens's peculiar complaint, Paule Vidal went searching for, and found, another, very similar Detthow landscape in which there happened to be nothing resembling a well in the foreground. Evidence to suggest that the painter recomposed the scene to order does not apparently exist. In any case, surely the experience of expunging the well from his Detthow must have given Stevens a sense that he could in effect create the sort of painting he wanted once his agent gave him a generic sense of it. His agent, for her part, learned to balance his demands for conformity—his instructions were, essentially, for her to produce for him a painting which best matched his conception of it—against her own sense of what was good to look at. The Detthow he bought is one which, Vidal wrote, “*most closely resembles [reproduit] the photograph that I sent you and at the same time is pleasing to the eye [réjouit la vue]. . . . Don't worry: there are no wells in it!*” (HEH, Vidal, December 9, 1948, WAS 2833; emphasis added in translation).

Depending on a photograph to support her letters in the case of the Detthow, Vidal had tried one way of flagging misreadings that always threatened to arise from the literalization of her agency. Though misreadings resulted still, they were directed at the relatively simple problem of identifying a shared view of the artwork (is *this* object in *our* photograph *a well*?). When finally she regained contact with Tal Coat in the spring of 1949, and described for Stevens two sets of paintings

complexion, texture, or surface, which was, she thought, likely to please him (“par la couleur me paraît susceptible de vous plaire”) (HEH, Vidal, July 7, 1948, WAS 2829).

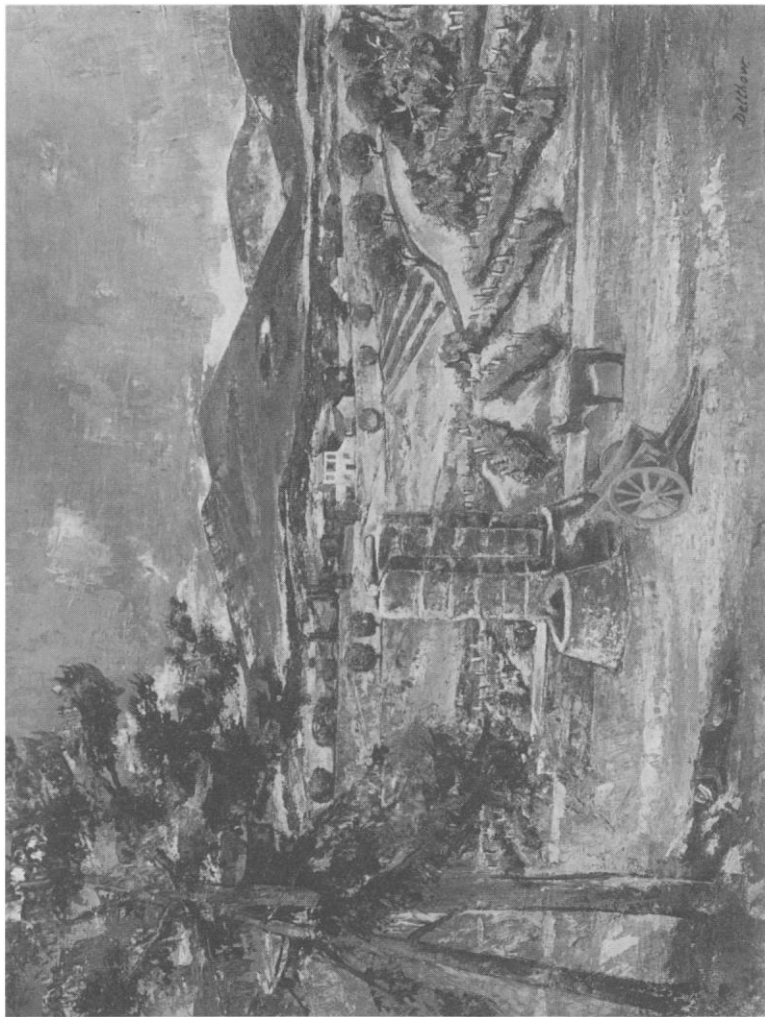


Figure 2. Photograph of Eric Dethlow painting, by Marc Vaux, landscape with well. Enclosed in HEH, WAS 2832. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library.

he might like, she did not send photographs but tried another manner of relieving herself of the burden of depending on words to convey visualities. After describing four paintings in her letter announcing her rediscovery of the elusive Tal Coat, she herself sketched in pencil the shapes and outlines of the objects in two of them, hoping to add this abstract presentation of the painter's original representative work to the usual linguistic one provided in the text of the letters.

I imagine that you have been impatiently awaiting news of the Tal Coats. I've been to the gallery that exhibits and handles the sale of his works.

I saw a dozen Tal Coats, some of them done in his current style which is, if not abstract, at least analytical, and others done in the style of his 1945–46 still lifes.

Those done in his current style are studies of movement such as whirlpools composed of intertwining lines whose strokes, in shadings of green, attempt to render the instantaneousness of movement. Similarly, in another one, entitled "Skate [*Raie*] Turning in Water," green lines with a red spot at the center show a fish caught in all its spontaneity. This painting, which measures 45 × 48 centimeters, costs 50,000 francs. The price of the whirlpools is 40,000 francs for the one measuring 41 × 33 centimeters and 35,000 francs for another one measuring 35 × 33 centimeters that is also done in shades of green, with brown lines.

As for the still lifes, I've seen two that I rather liked: one is a painting of an assortment of pots, jugs, and glasses on a table; the other is of fish-heads. The simple sketch [of each] that I am enclosing with my letter is the best I can do to give you an idea of what they look like. . . .

In spite of all the trust you have so kindly placed in me, I still feel I have to let you know what the Tal Coats that I have seen look like. Although describing a painting is certainly not an easy thing to do, I feel so overwhelmed by such a responsibility that I don't dare make a choice. (HEH, Vidal, May 28, 1949, WAS 2837)

The first still life described above is, of course, the one Stevens bought. Vidal's crude pencil sketches, by abstracting the form of the objects from the objects themselves, kept substance from relation at least until the painting was shipped and the poet could see for himself, at which point substance would be poured back into form. But Vidal's "misreading" did not convey less of a painting. On the contrary, the sketches, in combination with her verbal descriptions, offered the poet a fuller sense of the painting's iconicity. The stages in which the painting was revealed—verbal description, crude pencil sketch, the artwork itself—allowed it to fulfill as much of its diagrammatic potential as possible. They lent a rare if accidental sense of direction and process to the act of poetic perception; abstract form gave way to relative size and relation among forms, then to a filling in of substance—a slow reenactment of what the painter did with his canvas.

Part of the mimetic claim of the poem-about-painting, then, is the

cotemporality of process. The narrative, to the extent that this kind of poem-about-painting has one, is based on the painter's procedure measured out in time: invention to design to color conceived by the poet as invention, leading to arrangement, leading to elocution (see Steiner 1982: 57–58). It is as if the cubist epistemology of "The Man with the Blue Guitar" could somehow be reversed. There, presumed subjects, a man and his guitar, are "seen" as having given way to Picasso's multiperspectival man with guitar; these then give way to Stevens's profusely real man of words set in relation to his guitar as word maker. Here, on the other hand, we have, first, words denoting an otherwise unseen painting, then a diagram replicating relations between the signs in the painting (with a few color words pointing to the signs), and finally the representational painting (in color). The central stage in this reversal, the sketch, accidentally stripped the concept of the painting of nearly everything save relation. Thus Stevens made his painting more abstract than it really is. The temporal process by which Stevens "saw" the painting enabled him to cling to the idea that the Tal Coat he would buy was indeed abstract, despite Vidal's twice distinguishing the painter's early denotative manner from the late-forties abstractions.⁷ When Stevens got the canvas in his hands and saw that it could not really be called abstract, when he realized that words and diagram had endorsed his conception of its abstraction, he was given new confidence in his own talent for thinking relationally and wrote his poem to offer his version of replicating abstraction, thus attempting to anticipate Tal Coat's mimetic effects. His several statements that Tal Coat "contradicts all of one's expectations of a still life" (Stevens 1966: 654) help confirm this point. He was probably surprised to find the painting as it was; yet this was less a disappointment, a broken engagement, than a disillusionment, the inevitable undoing of the process of illusion. As ambassador of the process of "sight unseen" giving way to sight, the angel of the poem is not only an agent of illusion but an illusion himself, an agent of sight and a sight himself: "In *my*

7. "I should add," Vidal warned after seeing Tal Coat exhibited at the Galerie de France, "that I was a little surprised because everything I knew about him was his earlier style, which is quite different from his present one" (HEH, Vidal, July 7, 1948, WAS 2829). Elsewhere Stevens (1966: 638) seemed to acknowledge the present style as abstract. While even during the still-life period Tal Coat always concerned himself with "basic relationships or tensions," with, in the words of a recent observer, the way in which "forms push, lean on . . . each other," it is apparently true that the "present style" Vidal saw in the late forties was the beginning of his permanent interest in paintings as simple as "a line or a few squarish shapes" (Brenson 1985). It cannot surprise us that the impression of simple leaning forms, which is indeed the sense one gets of the painting from the sketch, misled Stevens into confirming his notion of Tal Coat's devotion to abstraction.

sight, *you see the earth again.*" He is apprehended in stages; has *arrived* in the narrative of the poem, yet *comes and goes* in all other senses, especially the visual; defies solidity and yet is of the earth; translates lightness from the language of visibility (light in color) to that of substance (weightless) and back to that of visibility, indicating the human (as in painting, indicating presence). The angel is "of such *lightest look* . . . that a turn / Of my shoulder and quickly, too quickly, I am gone." The narrative of "Angel Surrounded by Paysans" is the story of the angel's relation to the peasants, the story of how the relation came to be defined.

For some days Stevens considered the two paintings in the sketches made by his agent. Why had she described two groups of paintings, an abstract group from Tal Coat's recent style and the mid-forties still lifes, but sketched only the still lifes? The paintings she declined to sketch "*attempt to render the instantaneousness of movement.*" Whether she did so because she recognized the difficulty, not to say irony, of copying abstract paintings, or because by now she believed her client preferred representational still lifes to abstract studies of movement, she does not say. Was she, after all, an agent or an artist? Stevens's reply oddly settled the question about the abstract paintings; his apparent distaste for all representations of fish in particular surely made Vidal realize that Stevens would not have liked the "studies of movement *such as* whirlpools," especially the one entitled *Une raie tournant dans l'eau*, even if the title of the painting was the only aspect of it suggesting fish. She would take no chances. Disliking the second sketch of the second group, the still life of fishheads, he wrote a quick response to her descriptive letter and enclosed in it her first sketch, the one made from the still life he eventually bought. First he drew a red mark on one of the objects in the sketch (which he also called a "picture") and claimed that he could not identify it. "I do not know what the object is and do not care what it is," he complained, "so long as it is not a fish. If it is a fish, I don't want the picture because I do not like pictures of fish" (HEH, Stevens, June 3, 1949, WAS 2933). He returned this sketch to Vidal in France and it has been lost. Having only the surviving sketch of the fishheads (Figure 3), now with the Paule Vidal letters at the Huntington Library, I asked an architect, who by profession represents relations in diagrams, to work backwards from the painting and draw a sketch similar to the one Stevens saw. From this sketch it has become particularly clear to me that Stevens thought the napkin in the painting was a fish. The napkin seemed as central as the well he hated in the Detthow landscape, and, as I have already suggested, this was to misread centrality in the painting. The problem of the napkin-fish, though it seems as trivial as Stevens's complaint about the well and prompted similar assurances from Vidal (HEH, Vidal, July 6, 1949,

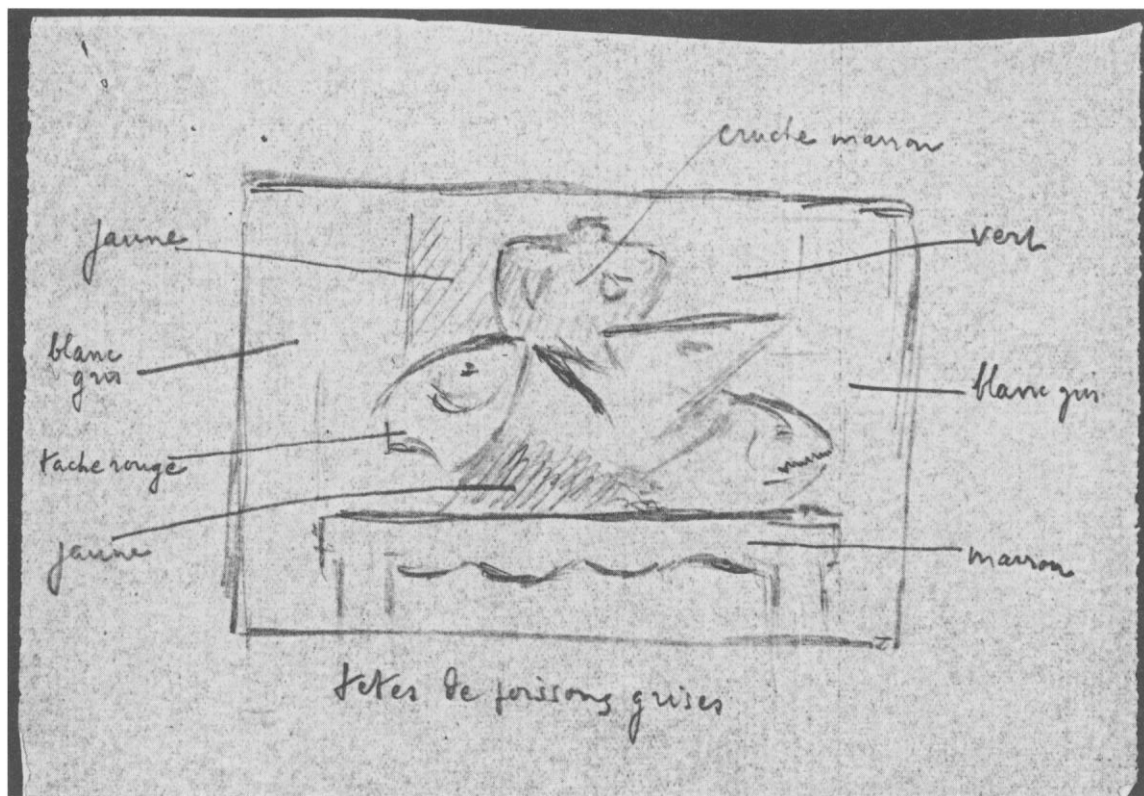


Figure 3. Pencil sketch of Pierre Tal Coat, *Fish-heads*, by Paule Vidal. Enclosed in HEH, WAS 2837. Reproduced by permission of the Huntington Library.

WAS 2838), demonstrated dramatically to Stevens that if the named identities of depicted objects might actually be transformed in time, then naming must be secondary. Because the process of apprehension had severed from relations what little he knew for certain about representativeness, the poet had time that summer—time the painter never had—to work exclusively on relations. In July, as he began planning a series of new short poems to “fulfill . . . promises right and left” (Stevens 1966: 643) to magazines and quarterlies, he considered the question about substantial transformation raised by Vidal’s intermediacy. After describing his agent’s shop, “in the expectation of seeing another picture from her” (ibid.: 642), he wrote Barbara Church that in his new poems he faced “the trouble . . . that poetry is so largely a matter of transformation. To describe a cup of tea without changing it and without concerning oneself with some extreme aspect of it is not at all the easy thing that it seems to be. . . . It is possible that pages of insight . . . are merely pages of description” (ibid.: 643).

Read with seventeen months’ dialogue of poet and agent, this distinction between insight and description must be taken seriously. The opposition continues into Stevens’s first responses to the arrival of the Tal Coat, and into the poem. His first letter to Vidal, written principally to date the painting’s arrival, is mostly about colors; the partly filled wine glass at the right-hand edge “warms” (red) and satisfyingly opposes the “cool blues and greens.” But he also describes “the forms and the arrangement of the objects” as “full of contrariness” (ibid.: 649). A few days later, writing to tell her he has renamed the painting *Angel Surrounded by Peasants*, he explicitly names the ratio: “The angel is the Venetian glass bowl on the left with the little spray of leaves in it. The peasants are the terrines, bottles and the glasses that surround it” (ibid.: 650). Concretely, such a rational poem might simulate peasants surrounding the angel in, say, a group of stanzas about peasants surrounding a stanza about an angel. More conventionally, the poem might center the angel in arranged stanzas: peasants, angel, peasants. The “centrality” of the angel in Stevens’s poem is indicated, rather, by the many lines he speaks and by what he says about his relation to peasants. One of the peasants introduces him with a question, which he then answers in the remaining eighteen lines. The title of the poem does all the work of setting the scene we are to imagine, though the syntactically connective “surrounded by” cannot replicate the visual sense of surrounding. Or at least, such concretely formal poetry is beyond Stevens’s idea of order (e.g., “Paysans Surrounding Angel Surrounded by Paysans”). “Angel” and “paysans” are rather *separated* by a middle term which “says” the second surrounds the first. It is this syntactical problem of arrangement by sight that the angel tries to address. The one peasant, presumably speaking for the

astonished others, “answers” the door, expecting visibility (an iconographic angel), and receives, instead, similarity (the glass bowl–angel). To the peasant’s question, which asks for “mere . . . description” (untransformed poetry), the angel responds with “insight” (the full transformation of visual into visual *and* verbal). As the angel of “reality” (line 3) momentarily stands, like a welcomed peasant himself, at the opened door (line 4), he cannot be “seen” except in relation to the peasants themselves (lines 8–12).

The napkin-fish of the painting, which calls out to be central, is not really, despite the dramatic black and blue lines drawn on its folds. The glass of wine, the bottle farthest to the right, and the terrine “of lettuce, I suppose” (ibid.: 653), all lean perceptibly toward the angel-bowl with the sprig, which in return leans back at them. The napkin is simply not a pot, bottle, or terrine; the angel-bowl, the darkest item in the arrangement, shares qualities with them. “I am one of you and being one of you / Is being and knowing what I am and know” (lines 9–10), says the angel, defining himself in relation to the peasants so that they might see him not as heavenly but as one of them. “The necessary angel of earth” here borrows from one of his fellows the qualities of *terr-ine*, “of the earth” (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, under *terrine*, 1888). Arrangement here means not attendance (line 7) but being part (line 8). Negatives first suggest difference, or what this particular angel is not: winged, starry, the invented set of representations limiting angels. But these negatives give way to equivalence and transparency (“Yet *I am* the necessary angel of earth, / Since, in my sight, *you see* the earth again, / Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set”), which are implied by a special sheen and lacquered quality. Equivalence is also critically suggested by Stevens’s choice of the name for the noun turned modifier, “terrine,” that the angel-object in the painting borrows from one of his fellows. The arrangement of the figures in the poem carries its idea. The angel of the imagination is an angel only by virtue of his relation to the earth, only in terms provided by the countryman basic question: What peasant *like myself* is at my door? The question is about similarity (*someone* there) and visibility (*someone there*) and temporarily defends, though does not employ, “mere description.” The angel of the imagination is really the angel of the earth in “necessary” relation to earthen figures (see Stevens 1966: 753). As the shiny terrine entails a higher order of depiction than the other bottles and pots, so the angel responds to the language of the peasants with a language about language, a language deeply penetrating the issue of relation.

III

In order to establish Stevens’s attention to relationality, I have by and large ignored the nature of the angels and peasants as angels and

peasants; by claiming that the poem tells the story of how the angel came to be related to the peasants, I can only have skirted the issue of narrative. Nor can I have accounted especially well for the choice of angels and peasants, other than by showing how the napkin of the agent's sketch was mistaken for a fish and may be said to have been similarly mistaken as an angel with wings (it does resemble one), and by showing that the word "terrine" suggests people of the earth. These explanations respond poorly to the substance of the angel of the earth, who in any case eschews wings and wishes generally to avoid the appearance of the conventional heavenly, and ironically substantial, angel.

The impetus behind Stevens's choosing angels and peasants that resemble Tal Coat's comes from a source independent of Tal Coat's painting yet closely connected to Stevens's interest in the poetry-painting alliance. These depictions, which can be understood as Stevens's substantive contributions to Tal Coat's "fresh" still life, come from Thomas McGreevy, whom I have described as now representing for Stevens the poet's urge to speak of poetry in terms of painting.

McGreevy's journeys from Dublin to his hometown of Tarbert, near the estuary of the Shannon River, in County Kerry, were occasions for writing long letters to Stevens about his mixed feelings of arriving home. This was particularly the case after one such letter caused Stevens to write the poem "Tom McGreevy, in America, Thinks of Himself as a Boy,"⁸ in which a reversal of poetic places results in McGreevy's America and Stevens's Ireland.

McGreevy's reaction to Stevens's use of the village Tarbert (explicitly mentioned in "Tom McGreevy, in America") was, on the one hand, to represent himself as an unhappy member of a politically transformed society (Great Britain under the Marshall Plan, which he mistrusted) and, on the other hand, to wish and pray for an ideal—transnational and extrabodily—condition as a messenger of God. "The true answer," he wrote of Stevens's request to use his name in the new poem, "would be a poem. Say a prayer that I may write it some day. Not to have written the poems one might have written had the Lord God had His way with one instead of organized society—but let that be. And after all you have written my poem for me." McGreevy's letters mix mystical, specifically Catholic, transmutations (air and earth) with a modernist's fascination for the way creative condensations physiologically result in poetry. He spoke of hypnogogic states, of mixings of selves. A typical sentence from these letters runs, "And it will be to find the myself that was Wallace Stevens there [*sic*]" (HEH, McGreevy,

8. In *The Auroras of Autumn* the poem was paired with another based on a letter from McGreevy, "The Westwardness of Everything," under the main title "Our Stars Come from Ireland" (Stevens 1954: 454–55).

August 4, 1948, WAS 145). "Tom McGreevy, in America" intelligently reproduces this confusion of visitor and countryman:

... The wind blows quaintly
 Its thin-stringed music,
 As he heard it in Tarbert.
 These things were made of him
 And out of myself.
 He stayed in Kerry, died there.
 I live in Pennsylvania.
 (Stevens 1954: 454–55)

In each narrative letter describing McGreevy's return to the village Tarbert, where his sister and friends would greet him, it is as if *Stevens* were the one arriving and being welcomed by the locals. The lad in the following description is obviously part of an attempt to imitate Stevens's representation of McGreevy as a boy in the poem bearing the Irish poet's name and hometown:

It is fitting that I send you a word from here [Tarbert] since you have been here too—yesterday. . . . I could have stayed a long time [on the rocks by the estuary looking westward over the Atlantic] with nothing happening beyond the talk of the full tide amongst the stones and it like a little song of comfort to a lad who hardly knew he was a poet long ago on the other side of the water. . . . But you, I knew for certain, were welcome in Tarbert. (HEH, McGreevy, August 21, 1948, WAS 146)

McGreevy's interest in the importance of painting to poetry went beyond his occasional lectures on painters and his intimate friendship with Jack B. Yeats.⁹ He wrote with insight to Stevens of dreams as leaving a linguistic residue condensing the usual visual one. This interartistic residue, he argued, may be visualized as poetry yet to be written. One dream he reported to Stevens left him with a visual sense of "three people crossing a very Irish landscape." Since he did not write the words of the poem just then, all that remained later was "the idea of three and a dimmed image." A second vision held five frightening words before him, "You might never be canonised," where "the 'you' was myself." The ambiguity of that unformed word-picture convinced McGreevy of his double image: on the one hand, the under-recognized "bald and tasselled saint" (a phrase Stevens used in his

9. Stevens attentively read McGreevy's (1945) introductory essay to a book of drawings and paintings by Jack Yeats. Here Stevens learned that Giorgione's *Adoration of the Shepherds* was in Washington (ibid.: 7). McGreevy's essay clearly demonstrates his interest in expression: "Man can imitate not only material forms but also immaterial moods. . . . It is only when a building . . . has some human expressiveness . . . that we consider it a work of art" (ibid.: 6–7). After reading McGreevy's essay, Stevens (1966: 586) wrote to assure him that writing about painting "is your present form of being a poet."

McGreevy poem and repeated by McGreevy in a letter; see HEH, McGreevy, August 21, 1948, WAS 146) and, on the other hand, the poet frightened that his written poems will merely be “repetitions of half-meanings” and incomplete metapoetry attending only to the process by which it might be written. He was fearful, that is, that such process-centered poetry leads to one’s failure as a poet—not being canonized (HEH, McGreevy, September 28, 1948, WAS 149).

At the end of the first week of September 1949, while Stevens was waiting for the arrival of his Tal Coat, a long letter from McGreevy came instead, describing yet another return to his country home. He writes of this visit as the return of a body transmuted from air to earth: “Now I have got fat from taking things easy but there is a new thing I had not known before. . . . the physical well-being of middle age, quite definitely not the physical well-being of youth which I knew quite well. *With that I had wings on my heels. Now I have no wings at all. I am as weighty as earth*” (HEH, McGreevy, September 1, 1949, WAS 156; emphasis added). Having undergone a minor operation, McGreevy tells Stevens of the strange diagnosis of his doctor; instead of saying, “You’ll live,” the doctor has matter-of-factly told the recovering poet, “Liquid passes through you regularly,” a report on the state of a poet’s self which has startled McGreevy and set him wondering whether he is indeed of air, earth, or fluid—winged, weighty, or watery. This sense of the human figure flowing and changing reminds him of a recent, well-received lecture on Goya he has delivered in Dublin, of which he mysteriously writes, “Here was a transmutation of values in earnest” (ibid.). As McGreevy arrives in Tarbert, “talking to my sisters and friends,” he therefore feels like half a figure, both as an ailing body and as a lecturing poet. His illness has transformed him from a necessary angel of earth to “liquid lingerings,” in the words of the poem and the physician. He is “half of a figure of a sort,” half of which, he feels certain, has been remade by Stevens. Surrounded by the country people of Tarbert, he writes, “I am contentedly in the presence of Wallace Stevens.” This visit to the country, then, was really a journey to “meet” Stevens, the unseen poet who “from 3000 miles away made poetry of Tarbert. I don’t try to understand the mystery of how you did it” (ibid.).

Stevens’s reply to McGreevy, describing his new Tal Coat, gives no hint that in the new poem he will imitate McGreevy’s sense of himself as visitor to the country, liquid half-figure, poet desiring canonization, and “countryman” trading on the sounds and images of rivers (Stevens’s Swatara for McGreevy’s Shannon) (Stevens 1966: 652–53). But a letter to Paule Vidal written just then does give a hint. Here Stevens tries to clear up his original announcement of the new title he gave the painting she had bought for him. In so doing, Stevens hints at

McGreevy's responsibility, not for the imagery but for its vital manner. He dismisses the physical nature of the peasants. His new still life "is not a manifestation of crude strength of a peasant." He did not mean to mislead her with the word "peasant," he notes, the arbitrary use of which is "merely to convey a meaning." Rather, he adds significantly, this painting—and she cannot have known it, but he is commenting on the new poem as well—is "a display of imaginative force: an effort to attain a certain reality purely by way of the artist's own vitality," not by way of the "reality" of whatever objects the artist chooses to depict (*ibid.*: 656). Whether recreating the arriving visitor-poet surrounded by sister and friends, a wingless, familiar saint defined by his sense of country people, or a resident-poet as "one of the countrymen" awaiting Stevens's arrival (he who has been there before, "one of you and being one of you"), the subjects draw on Stevens's perception of the vitality of this poet of desolidified values, who delights in shifting from air to earth or water and back. Stevens concludes that the vitality of the Tal Coat still life inheres in its unwillingness to dwell on the problems of "the painting of solids" (*ibid.*: 655). Though McGreevy's contribution to the substance of the poem-about-painting does finally help us read the angels and peasants as people of a real place (a village in Ireland), the more significant contribution from his fellow poet is that the very source of substance depicted is defined by its unwillingness to hold shape and solidity, or to remain true to form.

IV

Condensing to just three a long list of ways in which a poem can be about a painting, at the beginning of this essay I proposed the third of these as the toughest test of a thesis about the manner in which modern poetry and modern painting interact. At the risk of seeming even more reductive now, I would like to suggest not only that the third type (poems about paintings which do not primarily replicate substance) is a reliable test of the critical thesis, but that some poems apparently of the first type (poems generally using the language of painting) are actually of the third, waiting to be read in terms of a painting. I conclude with two examples. Since poems replicating relations make it difficult, if not impossible, to search backward for the particular painting as a source—the acquisition of the Tal Coat just happens to have left a complete trail of evidence—it is hardly surprising to hear from those studying Stevens's use of painting that, for instance, "we are quickly thwarted if we try to match Stevens's poems to particular visual sources," and that when we do "match" them, we find the poem "driven as much by linguistic as by visual elements" (Costello 1985: 73; cf. Altieri 1985: 102). As a response to this, my proposition becomes methodological: Once documentary evidence points a poem toward

a painting—and it must, as I insisted earlier, if we are even to begin to read the interesting third type—we can indeed still expect to be thwarted by the iconographic reading.

We may speak, for example, of the last lines of the eighteenth canto of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (Stevens 1954) as generally written in the language of painting. In speaking in this manner, the critic surely depends on the major idea of the poem, borrowed from modern painting and from Picasso in particular: “Or as daylight comes, / Like light in a mirroring of cliffs, / Rising upward from a sea of ex” (ibid.: 175). But such a first reading could not possibly respond to the “dream” of the first lines—“A dream (to call it a dream) in which / I can believe, in face of the object, / A dream no longer a dream, a thing” (ibid.: 174)—nor, incidentally, to the sound-name “ex” given to the sea in the closing relation (the cliff rises upward from the sea). The “particular visual source” which is supposed to “thwart” us need not. The poem, Stevens once admitted, “is the result of seeing” a painting by Eugene Berman, owned by James Thrall Soby; of the Bermans that Soby owned when Stevens wrote “Blue Guitar,” only one could possibly have “resulted” in those lines: *Memories of Ischia*.¹⁰ In this painting, a dense fog covers a scene at dawn or dusk; a cliff rises upward from a glossy, dark sea; several other “objects” in the painting resist identification because of the darkness and the sheen that seems to be created by the surface of the canvas itself. The combined effect is surely “a dream *no longer* a dream” and as such suggests dawn—waking—rather than dusk (see Stevens 1966: 360).¹¹ Stevens’s use of “dream” points to the dream as a language: “a dream (to *call* it a dream) in which I can believe.” The central object, the dark cliff, cannot be distinguished in the painting from its reflection in the water; up and down are thus confused, a result of (the absence of) light. Morning is a time for memory; the memory selects “certain nights” (line 5). “Morning is not sun,” in the words of a later canto in the same poem (Stevens 1954: 182). The absence of light indicates the presence of texture (what you cannot visualize, you touch), which, I would argue, tries to reproduce the physical feel of the canvas (e.g., “wind-gloss,” line 8), though this is a feeling “not of the hand” (line 6) but rather of

10. “The glimpses I have had of your collection,” Stevens wrote Soby, “have been precious to me and the fact is that No. XVIII of the MAN WITH THE BLUE GUITAR is the result of seeing one of your Bermans” (Texas, September 16, 1940, Charles Henri Ford collection).

11. Harold Bloom (1976: 129) reads this canto as marking the shift, as Steiner (1982: 10–11, 17, 20) generally cites it, from *enargeia* to *energeia*: “There is a movement here from a mimetic theory of poetry to an expressive theory, attended by a greater internalization of the self and by a sensory transposition from hearing, first to touching and then to seeing.”

the eye, as one inevitably takes in a textured painting. Only in the “face of the object” which resists being known as distinct (the cliff mostly in the absence of light) does one “believe” in such a whole sense perception, in visuality as a feeling (like a touch). “Morning is not sun,” then, perfectly condenses the description of this painting; a poem of negation (“ex”) helps express in the sounds of words the mirroring, distinction-denying sea named “ex,” though the nonsense reduction of sound from the name given to this dreamy place (“Ischia”/“ex,” place of “Isch”/sea of “ex”) is equally suggestive. Whereas in the case of the bright, clearly outlined Tal Coat still life the slow process by which Stevens discerned the objects depicted encouraged him to see the painting relationally, here in the Berman an absence of distinctions, itself imitating the absence of light on a real landscape, gives the poet the credence to make words of the objects in a painting as terms of a dreamwork. In a dreamwork substances replace each other so easily that one attends better to texture and relations (up, down; rising above; “ex” implying the time between former and latter) than to names given to things.

We have seen that the poem-about-painting of the first type, which borrows generally from the language of painting, may not in actuality depict an object or a scene in the world as if it were a model for painting. It may well depict worldly objects or scenes specifically and only as another painting already has. So to proceed with an interpretation centering on subject matter is potentially to miss formal similarity and to mistake a profusion of likenesses for a limitation placed on them. The irony of “if images are *all* we have” is powerful; it only pretends to be Stevens’s mature confession of imaginative limits. “Someone Puts a Pineapple Together” seems to be one of these borrowing poems, from its title, which suggests a natural object dismantled into pieces or shards by the modern imagination, to its recitation of twelve different but mutually inclusive views of what seems to have been the real, whole pineapple:

1. The hut stands by itself beneath the palms.
2. Out of their bottle the green genii come.
3. A vine has climbed the other side of the wall.
4. The sea is spouting upward out of rocks. . . .
6. White sky, pink sun, trees on a distant peak.
7. These lozenges are nailed-up lattices. . . .
10. This is how yesterday’s volcano looks. . . .
12. An uncivil shape like a gigantic haw.

(Stevens 1951b: 86)

We say the poem is “like” a painting because it takes an object whole and reworks it a number of times. Yet again the evidence suggests that the modernist pineapple likenesses in the poem are based on

a painting of pineapples dismantled by another modernist imagination, namely, one of the Cuban *origenistas*, Mariano Rodríguez, whose watercolor Stevens (1966: 513) had received as a gift and hung in his private bedroom.¹² It is not quite enough, then, to read the poem as a response to nature in the manner of modern painting, for the hard, conventional work of relating to the world, of breaking up natural objects into their constituents, specifically precedes the work of the poet. The poem's activity in doing this work "similarly" is not original but reproductive; it does not bracket a set of meanings but releases a profusion of them. Thus the poem does less dismantling than interpreting. Forms already reorganized into new geometries, now given in words, will perhaps endlessly resemble entirely new things: the hut, green genii, owls' eyes, latticework, spouting sea, yesterday's volcano, and so on. The list is not exhaustive but suggestive. The poem's point about its own structure is directly related to the painting and only indirectly related to a worldly pineapple. Each assessment of relation (between parts) forms an entirely new whole. The reading of the poem's similarity to painting is not frustrated in the first place because it can at least be said, however basically, that the poem engages painterly language; but this, to me, is really the least that can be said. Only as a poem represents the relations of parts to a whole as they are related in a painting, however—only as the overused word "represents" takes on this extra sense—is modernist poetry best understood as "a wholly artificial nature, in which / The profusion of metaphor has been increased" (Stevens 1951b: 83).

References

- Altieri, Charles
 1985 "Why Wallace Stevens Must Be Abstract," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, edited by Albert Gelpi, 86–118 (New York: Cambridge University Press).
- Bloom, Harold
 1977 *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
- Brenson, Michael
 1985 "Art: Exhibit of 'Signs' at the New Museum," *New York Times*, May 17, p. C-22.

12. Stevens later saw an exhibition of oil paintings, gouaches, and drawings by Mariano in New York and noted their "unexpected force." "Someone Puts a Pineapple Together" was composed as early as the following summer, in 1946, though its first public appearance (as part of a lecture) did not come until February 1947. In suggesting the significantly earlier dating, I am referring to a letter from José Rodríguez Feo, the young man who made a present of the watercolor, in which the new poem and the painter Mariano, "your favorite designer of pineapples," are clearly connected (Coyle and Filreis 1986: 53–54, 88n).

Costello, Bonnie

1985 "Effects of an Analogy: Wallace Stevens and Painting," in *Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernism*, edited by Albert Gelpi, 65–85 (New York: Cambridge University Press).

Coyle, Beverly, and Alan Filreis

1986 *Secretaries of the Moon: The Letters of Wallace Stevens and José Rodríguez Feo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

McGreevy, Thomas

1945 *Jack B. Yeats* (Dublin: Victor Waddington).

Steiner, Wendy

1982 *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Stevens, Wallace

1950 "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," *Poetry London* 5(17): 5–6.

1951a *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (New York: Knopf).

1951b "The Relations between Poetry and Painting," in Stevens 1951a.

1954 *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Knopf).

1966 *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, edited by Holly Stevens (New York: Knopf).